

## **GANJA AND HESS**

(Bill Gunn, 1973)

### **African Elements**

Bungeli Work Song

Queen of Myrthia

African dress worn by HG and Ganja

The knife

African artifacts

(?) I put Ganja here (Ganja is a hindu word for grass and is best know from Jamaica). Her natural beauty was mistaken by her mother as lust (see Venus in Meda's letter). Ganja turned this hurt into a tool--greed (at the end she is unwilling to give up the vampirism).

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### **European Elements**

Classical music heard in HG's home

Museum/classical art

Jack Sargent (white guy at museum)

Christianity (esp its "history" of the world)

HG's wealth, esp the manner of its display

Boys school son goes to/emphasis on French

(?) I put Meda here (Med(e)a = helped Jason get Golden Fleece and resorted to murder--though a female? Perhaps reaching too much). He is trapped in his head, into nihilistic European notions, and cannot feel.

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(?) Somehow, it seems to me, this film is about the interaction/intersection of the African and the European. Hess Green [his name suggests a dichotomy between Hess = German, technical, philosophical, European and Green = natural, nature Africa] is a negative example of the intersection, a man for whom "blood" = race is a disease which like an addiction can not be got rid of. Somehow his interaction with Meda and Ganja frees him from his [Fanonian] alienation and allows him to reintegrate into the African American community. [Is, perhaps, the film a critique of the Black bourgeoisie who, unable to continue the civil rights movement, drew away from the African American masses and turned to material gain?]

By this analysis, the most positive thing in the film is the Black church (along with gospel and the blues) as the most positive form of interaction/ intersection of the African

and the European. The Reverend Luther Williams (same German/British name combination) is the most positive figure. Perhaps they are opposite sides of the same coin. Is it as simple as this--Meda makes HG see and think about his blackness and Ganja makes him feel it (sex and weed and love). HG drinks both's blood, has sex with Ganja, and perhaps with Meda (watch their fight--given as Meda's dream). Thought and feeling, disalienated, he is able to reintegrate.

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## NOTES TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF GANJA AND HESS

After his dream (?) of killing Dr. Hess Green, Meda types, reads and crumples up the following statement [bold face = symbols in the film] before taking his own life.

To the Black male children [film ends with images of them],

Philosophy is a prison. It disregards the uncustomary things about you. The result of individual thoughts is applicable only to itself. There is a dreadful need in man to teach. It destroys the pure instinct to learn. The navigator learns from the stars, the stars teach nothing. The **sun** opens the mind and sheds light on the **flowers**. The **eyes** shame the pages of any book. Gesture destroys concept. Involvement mortifies vanity. You are the despised of the earth [the title of a book by Frantz Fanon]. It is as if you were water in the desert. To be adored on this planet is to be a symbol of success. And you must not succeed on any terms. Because life is endless. You are nameless like the **flower**. You are the child of Venus and her natural affection is **lust**. She will **touch your belly with her tongue**, but you must not suffer in it. For love is all there is and you are cannon fodder in its defense.

Hess Green [Part I] after discovering Meda's body [and drinking his blood?]:

Oh Lord, as we are baptized into the death of they blessed son, our savior Jesus Christ, and by continually mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him. Through the grave and death then we may pass to our joyful resurrection, by his merit who died the same.

Hess Green [Part II] after he and Ganja have consummated their relationship. They walk together in African dress. She has said that she dreamed that he murdered her:

The only perversions that can be comfortably condemned are the perversions of others. I will persist and survive without God's or society's sanction. I will not be tortured, I will not be punished. I will not be guilty.

Then as he ceremonially stabs her:

Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ which was shed for thee preserve thy body and soul for everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for thee and be thankful.

Then their conversation by the fire after they dispose of the stranger's body. She complains of being cold and asks him if he is. He says he has gotten used to it. Then he says:

It [cold, I assume] is to guide our destruction, solution, hell the fourth queen of mercy. If you worship any God whatsoever and if you believe this God to be good and if this God in which you trust be destroyed by forces dangerous to the survival of love, and if the implement by which this God was destroyed . . . . For this, the symbol of the destruction of life, has cast its shadow on the beast that he released into the bosom of his creator having suffered and tasted the blood of the womb of nature. He may sleep in her lap for ever. Amen.

She:

If the shadow of the cross is against the heart, it'll destroy us?

He:

The cross is only an implement of torture. It's shadow is the darkness it casts. You see, nothing can survive the shadows.

Made curious by the wearing of white masks in two scenes (Hess Green's dreams [?] after his dinner with Meda and later after he kills the pimp and the prostitute), I speculate that there is some relationship between this film and the work of Frantz Fanon, especially his book Black Skin, White Masks, which was published by Grove press in the US in 1967 (original French publication in 1952]. There are tantalizing echoes of Fanon's ideas and even phrasings in the film. A key theme of Fanon is the psychological damage done to the Black man (sic) by European colonialism (he was from Martinique and went to France to study, becoming a psychoanalyst). Here are some quotes to give a sense of that.

At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man.

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell (BSWM, 8).

The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle (18).

. . . [I] say that philosophy has never saved anyone (29).

He ["the Negro"] has no culture, no civilization, no "long historical past.

This may be the reason for the strivings of contemporary Negroes: to prove the existence of a black civilization to the white world at all costs (34).

I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered by blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: "Sho' good eatin'"[I think he means dialect speech here].

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my body with black blood? (112)

## **GANJA AND HESS (Bill Gunn, 1973)**

Midst of the Blaxsploitation Films of the late 60s and early 70s.

Considerable white influence--financing, some direction, writing, etc.

Black male action hero, on border of good and evil

Usually isolated from Black community

Considerable violence and sexuality (for black male hero)

Sexist portrayal of women

Popular with inner city Black audiences

Opposed by middle class Black leaders and intellectuals

An early such film, however, was Melvin van Peebles SWEET SWEETBACK'S BAADASS SONG (1971) which has many of these features, but places the hero squarely in the midst of the Black community and by so doing, becomes a much more political film. In this film, according to Diawara, Van Peebles "thematizes Black nationalism by casting the Black community as an internal colony, and Sweetback, a pimp, as the hero of decolonization"(9). Tony Cade Bambara also comments on the film: See page 118.

It is in this context that Bill Gunn sought funding for GANJA AND HESS. he proposed to make a Blaxploitation vampire film. However, when the producers saw what he had done, they freaked and yanked the film away from Gunn. They cut it up and put it out as BLOOD COUPLES. They made another version, apparently, called DOUBLE POSSESSION. Fortunately, artful dodger that he was, Bill Gunn managed to secure an original print and keep it at the Museum of Modern Art. According to Diawara, when the film was shown at Cannes in 1973, crowds jumped up in the middle of the film to yell bravo and cheer at some of the film's camera work. For the next 7-8 years it was one of MOMA's most demanded films even though Gunn had to give permission for each show. It quickly became an underground classic. In 1980 it was screened in Paris as part of a festival of Indie Black Amer Films. People got to talking and a plan was made to raise the \$10,000 needed to make a 16 mm internegative and thus preserve the film and make it available for general distribution. So Gunn toured with the film and the money was raised.

Diawara's two comments on these two films.--p. 10 and 11.

GANJA AND HESS is a complex film. On the surface it deals with Dr. Hess Green, his new assistant George Meda (played by Bill Gunn), Hess Green's chauffeur who is also a minister, and Meda's wife Ganja who marries Hess Green after Meda's death.

Dr. Hess Green is an elegant, sophisticated person who works as an anthropologist and archivist in a museum. he is studying a long extinct African tribe that died out from a strange blood disease. He speaks foreign languages, lives in a mansion, drives a rolls, and sends his son to a wealthy boarding school.

The chauffeur/minister is the least developed character, but, I think, a very important one. From him we learn lots more about HG--that he is addicted to blood because of a disease he got from an artifact he collected. At the end of the film, HG goes to church to seek forgiveness for his sins.

George Meda is an artist and psychotic and a drunk who philosophizes about death. Becomes a victim of HG

Ganja--arrives from Amsterdam and quickly gets involved with HG and continues even after she finds her husbands body. She is left standing at the end, awaiting a hunky young Black man who emerges from the pool and runs in full frontal nudity toward the house.

The film is visually stunning and uses a wide variety of styles from cool realism (even apparent documentary) to dark ritual to melodrama.

What the film means is not easy to say or to work out and various interpretations--quite different--are possible. It is very difficult, even after watching the film several times, to figure out the status of many of key scenes and sometimes even what is happening in them. This is partly why Diawara calls it postmodern. Some scenes seem to be dreams, but it is not clear whose. Other montages of objects, usually art objects or scenes from Africa appear without a clear attribution--who sees or thinks this material? Is it documentary?

In an article that Diawara wrote with Phyllis Klotman for JUMP CUT, they suggest looking at the film in terms of the point of view of the key characters.

The chauffeur/minister--He narrates his part of the story in voice over narration, the only one who does that. Much of the christian religious imagery in the film seems to come from or be seen from his POV. In his sermon he establishes three time periods--the pre-christian, the immediate past and the present. He seems to be the voice of history and seems a very

reliable narrator. In his "story" the pre-christian world of blood drinking africans, a world to which HG has returned, is a lost world in need of redemption as is HG.

George Meda is involved in an oedipal scenario, trying to destroy the father--HG--in order to claim an identity. The desire for the mother is missing--which, considering that Gunn was gay, makes a certain amount of sense. Meda is also the romantic artist that Julia Lesage talks about in her BB article. His art is that of death and silence and negation--In his letter to a "black man" he advocates staying away from philosophy and any kind of action. As an artist he feels caught in a paralyzed state between white and black. His death scene is amazing and very hard to interpret--looked at closely it could even be seen as an act of gay male sex.

Ganja--does not actually narrative her story, it seems narrated for her. Yet it is she who is left standing at the end--Diawara and Klotman say the following about her: Page. 36.

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The interpretation I worked out for the film a few years ago is different from theirs and less sympathetic to Ganja-----

Finally, I need to throw one other thing into the pot--Frantz Fanon. Tony Cade Bambara referred to Fanon in her reference to SWEETBACK and I would do the same in reference to GANJA AND HESS, though to my knowledge no one else has.

Frantz Fanon was born in the French colony of Martinique in the Caribbean in 1925, went to school there and subsequently in France. He served for awhile in the French Army during WWII and then studied medicine and psychiatry. He published Black Skin, White Masks in 1952. In 1953 he was stationed at a psychiatric hospital in Algiers Just as the Algerian revolution began. He aided the rebels by training nurses and treating people secretly in the hospital. As the authorities were closing in, he quit the hospital and moved to Tunis, becoming an important editor and diplomat for the FLN. In 1960 he contracted leukemia and was treated in the USSR and in the USA

where in died later that year. Shortly before he died he saw the publication of his most important book: The Wretched of the Earth, which became a major revolutionary text in the 1960s. He was buried in Algeria in 1961 and the next year Algeria gained its independence.

Fanon was a psychiatrist and one of his major themes was the affect of colonization on what he called the native. For him colonization was simply an act of brutal violence, an act of destruction and it had profound affects on its victims. Because of the wearing of white masks in two scenes, I became curious about any connection to Fanon--a connection one can almost assume in any third world work done in the late 60s and into the 70s. I want to read you some quotes which you will find echoed in GANJA AND HESS.

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